

# Once homeless teen drives to inspire

By [Gary Warth \(/staff/gary-warth/\)](#) 8:12 p.m. Sept. 17, 2013



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Brittnie Pemberton gets behind the wheel of a new Chevrolet Spark she received in a surprise presentation at Jimmie Johnson Chevrolet. As a subject of the "Pictures of Hope" project six years ago, the once-homeless teen's wish list included a college scholarship, a reunited family and a new car. The wishes came true. — *Howard Lipin*

Most teenagers probably wouldn't look back fondly on a year spent in a homeless shelter.

Brittnie Pemberton sees the time as transformational — a period that has led to new beginnings, life-changing opportunities (including a new car that she received Tuesday) and a story that continues to inspire others.

"My family used to be kind of broken and my dad was an alcoholic for awhile. We were really scared about the future," the 16-year-old said after being surprised with a Chevy Spark at the Jimmie Johnson Chevrolet dealership in Kearny Mesa.

Brittnie recalled asking her father, Timothy, to go to church one day in 2007. He never made it because he was arrested after crashing his company's car while driving under the influence. He was arrested and lost his job.

Brittnie, her brother and their mother, Tanya, began a one-year stay in the Salvation Army's Door of Hope, a transitional living center for homeless women and their children in San Diego. Timothy Pemberton moved separately into the Salvation Army's rehabilitation center.

"It was the best year of my life," Brittnie said. "I remember there was a strong sense of family there."

One day in September 2007 at Door of Hope, she met photojournalist Linda Solomon, who had created the national "Pictures of Hope" project a year earlier to increase awareness of homeless youths. Solomon gives disposable cameras to children in the program, and the pictures they take of their life's wishes are featured on greeting cards sold to raise money for charities helping the homeless.

"The most important for me as a photojournalist is to show children that their dreams matter," Solomon said. "We show the children their dreams are respected and their dreams can come true."

She visits 12 shelters a year and asks 15 children at each one to write a wish list that shows their own "picture of hope." The top wish on Brittnie's list was a home, followed by a college scholarship.

Brittnie, then 9, largely avoided wishing for personal possessions. She asked for world peace, an end to world hunger, happiness, an athletic life and to have her family reunited.

Near the bottom of the list, at No. 14, she also wanted a new car.

With the camera Solomon gave her, Brittnie took a photo of San Diego State University. The picture was printed on a holiday card above the words, "I hope to get a scholarship. — Brittnie, age 9."

And then unexpected things began to happen.

San Diego State University's Alumni Association learned about Brittnie's dream and offered her a four-year, full scholarship ([http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20071214/news\\_1m14brittnie.html](http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20071214/news_1m14brittnie.html)) on the condition that she eventually meets admissions requirements. Journalist Diane Sawyer heard about the scholarship offer and interviewed Brittnie on national television.

After a year at Door of Hope, Brittnie's family reunited when the Salvation Army offered Timothy the chance to help renovate one of its rehabilitation houses. The job came with the opportunity for the entire household to live in that dwelling for five months.

Brittnie's father eventually ran his own heating and air-conditioning company, while her mother worked at the Salvation Army Kroc Center. They recently decided to dedicate the next chapter of their lives to helping others through the Salvation Army. He sold his business and she quit her job, and in August the couple entered a Salvation Army seminary in Palos Verdes Peninsula. The whole family lives there now.

"They gave me a place to recover from alcoholism and drug addiction," Timothy Pemberton said Tuesday at the car dealership. "They gave my family a place to be rooted while I went through that program. The Salvation Army was everything to us at that time."

After the couple completes the 22-month seminary program, they will be commissioned as lieutenants and appointed to a Salvation Army unit, probably somewhere in the southwest, said Salvation Army Maj. Lee Lescano.

Some things on Brittnie's original wish list have changed. She no longer wants to be an actress or famous chemist, as she wrote at age 9, but a child psychologist so she can help youths living with challenges similar to those she faced. She has been serving as a volunteer mentor with the Salvation Army.

"She shows the importance of giving back," Solomon said about how Brittnie has become a positive role model. "She has lived our dreams by showing that you have to help others in life."

Solomon has stayed in touch with Brittnie and recently took her shopping for a present for her 16th birthday. She remembers Brittnie turning down every potential gift, then finally allowing her to buy a dress — for the teen's mother.

For the past six years, Solomon has held on to Brittnie's wish list and recently realized one had not come true. She talked to some executives at Chevrolet, the sponsor for "Pictures of Hope," to change that.

One Tuesday morning, Brittnie and her parents visited Jimmie Johnson Chevrolet, where they were told that Solomon was being honored for her national project.

It was a ruse. Wish No. 14 came true when a tarp was pulled off a new silver Chevy Spark and its keys were handed to Brittnie, who has a learner's permit. As she sat in the vehicle for the first time, a somewhat overwhelmed Brittnie was asked if she had any advice for other homeless children.

"I would say there's hope for the future, and things get better, always," she said. "And time really makes everything better. You need to have your hopes and dreams, and never give up on them."

Looking at the wish list she once wrote, Brittnie mentally checked off her accomplishments.

"I definitely have happiness," she said. "I definitely have my dad and my friends. And my mom and dad are back together. I don't think I'm going to end world hunger anytime soon, but it would be a great thing to do."

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